



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE INFLUENCE OF COMEDY UPON OPERATIC FORM

By JOHN C. GRIGGS

IT is perhaps anomalous that of all musical forms, opera has been the one most difficult to bring to satisfactory realization. Whether tested by theory or popular approval, no one kind of opera has as yet vindicated itself as an art form of a very high degree of perfection. With all its lure to the composer and attractiveness to the public, it has never reached the fulfilment of the symphony, or the static classical development of the Elizabethan or the Greek drama, the Bach fugue or the Gothic cathedral. The majesty and finality of utterance and the dramatic cogency of Gluck's *Orpheus*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Beethoven's *Fidelio* or Wagner's *Parsifal* may well claim for them something of classic quality, but in spite of such rich and free growth through many schools of composition, the opera does not as yet furnish, as did the *Laocoön* to Lessing, a final and perfect standard of criticism.

That this *dramma per musica* has been so much more difficult of realization than its first Florentine sponsors thought, is the more strange in view of the simplicity of its fundamental element, the song. Music shows such affinity with speech in both lyric and dramatic expression that its most natural and complete development would seem probable through some musico-dramatic form. Such, however, has not been the fact. Absolute music, with more artificiality in its beginnings, has often reached coherence and cogency, while dramatic song, free from artifice at the start, has been burdened with artificiality and inconsistency in its constant urge toward larger dramatic form and expressiveness.

Mere complexity of resource is an obvious and partial explanation of this condition. In the high degree of organization necessary to any art, the reconciling and co-ordinating of diverse materials can be managed only by an artist whose grasp is secure upon them all. In just this wide mastery which shall bring every lovely detail into balanced subordination to the whole the opera writer has failed. Not only has the literary component in this dramatic form usually been beyond the reach and control

of the composer, but within the musical material the seduction of one or another beauty has been the quicksand to catch the feet of all, even, indeed, of the great Wagner himself who thought that he alone trod the firm highway of this complex artistry. At every turn unified operatic power has been endangered by the charm of such lesser interests as beautiful melody, beautiful rendition, brilliant passage writing, and spectacular display, and in these post-Wagnerian days, by over-emphasis of symphonic orchestral material.

The first century and a half of opera was marked in its native Italy by an intensive cultivation within narrow limits of the solo *aria*, and in France, by amalgamation with the dramatic dance. Soon after its rather awkward start as a merely recitative form, opera received the important addition of the *aria*, which presently became its dominant feature. A rigid formalism crystallized in the early eighteenth century as the direct product of the two elaborate arts of *aria* writing and *aria* singing. This fixed musical form, although often overloaded with useless and tawdry experimentation, soon reached a high state of perfection and occasionally even of dramatic power. Indeed the freedom and facility of its musicianship made the *aria* a most important influence upon the development of other musical structures both instrumental and vocal. Thematic material of sonata and symphony, of Handel chorus and indeed of all eighteenth-century music derives much from the fluent invention and careful workmanship of Scarlatti and the whole choir of Italian *aria* writers. The art of melody finds in this source its richest inheritance for all time. But this faithful and progressive workmanship had been unfortunate in its immediate effect upon the music drama. The *aria*, beautiful as it was, had become an end in itself hedged about by certain sharp set rules of writing and rendition, and the opera had become little more than a prescribed number and sequence of such *arias* interspersed with bits of formal recitative. Being performed by vocalists of supreme technical ability who vied with each other in brilliancy of execution, the dramatic pretence of the play had almost disappeared. As a sporting event, or competitive exhibit of human skill, and as a presentation of sheer musical beauty the opera was a great popular success, but as a dramatic form it had fallen of its own weight.

Of the virtuosity of singing much the same may be said. Through very extravagance it also had developed excellent and elaborate resources. Vocalism still looks back to those old *aria* days of *il bel canto*, as the fountain head of much that is loveliest

and most valued in its special art. It was, however, in the main, a vocalism of the lyricist rather than that of the dramatist.

As a dramatic form, then, the eighteenth-century *opera seria* had failed, but in its failure had successfully evolved two most important elements, melodic writing and vocal rendition. Remoteness of theme from the common interests and experiences of life had also aggravated the tendency to formalism and dramatic insincerity. The stories of Eurydice, Ariadne and the like had been written again and again and reduced to such a slender and meaningless thread that Greek mythology would have had to rub its stony eyes to recognize itself as portrayed by the Italian librettists. These collaborators, far from being considered dramatists, were expected to fashion verses suited to the *aria di bravura*, the *aria di portamento*, etc., with vowel sounds convenient to the long vocal roulades and other embellishments of which they so largely consisted.

As has often happened in other arts comedy appeared at this point to relieve the tensivity and unreality of the situation. The *opera buffa*, or Italian musical comedy, developing somewhat suddenly, reached its greatest significance as a strictly separate form in Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* in 1733, about a century after the opera was well launched as a popular institution. Appearing first as a little spoken comedy given in the long waits between the acts of the *opera seria*, it was soon set to music imitating in part the serious traditions but permeated in the main by a new and unconventional spirit and freedom of form. Its subjects ranged from buffoonery to the most refined humor and satire. From Pergolesi on the two forms of opera, the *seria* and the *buffa*, interacted beneficially upon each other until in Mozart's tragedy of *Don Giovanni* and his comedy *Figaro* we see almost complete identity of form. Comedy with Mozart has seized upon every resource of the serious drama, and tragedy has been quick to appropriate every new device which the *opera buffa* has introduced. For it is to be noted that the innovations and improvements came almost invariably from the comedy side. They were in part as follows:

Subjects chosen from every-day life. *La Serva Padrona*, for instance, tells of the infelicities of the domestic help problem; and so since then such tragedies as *The Prophet*, *Tosca*, and *Madame Butterfly* have been in vogue, coming much nearer to the facts of common life than the remoteness of *Theseus* and *Artaxerxes*. There is much, however, to be said in favor of the old mythological or heroic subject as operatic theme when used for the portrayal

of idealized human experience. Dramatic power in opera must attach itself to persons rather than events, to things felt rather than to things seen. The historical and the spectacular music drama with all their attractions fail psychologically, and are not a dramatic improvement on the mythological, for it is human life and experience which we must see and feel. It was the perfunctoriness of the old librettos which destroyed their value, and not necessarily their subjects. Gluck's later return to the Orpheus story showed its superb possibilities as a drama of life.

Duets and other concerted numbers were another happy discovery unknown to the old *seria* form. Verdi's *Lucia* sextette is but an evolution from the duet between master and maid in *La Serva Padrona*. Along this same line of concerted singing Loggrosino devised the *finale*, in which an act is brought to climacteric conclusion by the co-operation of all the characters. This *finale*, now so familiar, was later introduced into the serious opera and there powerfully developed by Piccinni.

Opera buffa used the bass and baritone voices on terms of equality with tenors and sopranos, a practice unknown before, and then began that long line of *basso buffo* parts as Leporello and Figaro, on down even to Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*. More important, however, is the sequence of major rôles for low voice. The availability of this resource made possible Don Giovanni himself, Sarastro, than which rôle Mozart never wrote anything more majestic, Hans Heiling, Ernani, Gurnemanz, Amfortas and numberless others.

But aside from these obvious details of construction, *opera buffa* did much more by its general deftness of touch, its readiness of effect, and its omission of whatever formality could be discarded without loss. Nor is this surprising. Comedy is the universal leveler of life, the gracious light resting strained vision, the solvent breaking the tension of overwrought effort. Precisely the same streams of influence can be pointed out in the spoken drama. In the topsy-turvy world of absurdity which we call comedy, things in some magical way fall into their proper perspective. We see straighter, proportion is restored and truth revealed. The climax of pure Italian *opera buffa* was reached in Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* and Rossini's *Barber of Seville*.

A most interesting obverse glimpse is Handel's use of the cut and dried *recitative-aria* form without modification, for comic expression. In his *serenata* of *Acis and Galatea* he makes the giant Polyphemus warble his love for the nymph. It is a little hard to think of Handel as a humorist. It was possibly a little

hard for him himself. In the first place there is much more variety of characterization in the Handel *arias* than our modern unfamiliarity with his idiom allows us to see. They all smack of oratorio to the modern taste and so this Polyphemus love song "O ruddier than the cherry" sounds, at first hearing, practically like any other rolling, billowy, Handelian *aria*. We fail to catch all its little delicious permeating humors. Comedy in this instance has not changed the form but triumphs within its rigid set pattern. Here are a long formal *recitative* as introduction, a full-fledged florid *aria* with long *da capo* repeat, and here also even the traditional mythological subject. The only concession to comedy's tradition is the bass voice. But how elastic all this apparatus becomes to the purpose. The winsome spirit of play has touched the form without modifying the externals. The familiar cadences of recitative take on a new charm in the words "I rage, I melt, I burn. The feeble god has stabbed me to the heart" and when at its close Polyphemus' clumsiness essays the words: "In soft enchanting accents let me breathe sweet Galatea's beauty and my love" the effect is more amusing than if lighter methods had been followed. Then this great cavorting giant launches his formidable serenade, with heavy misplaced accent, and bellows forth his love for the "nymph more bright than moonshine night, like kidlings blithe and merry," with a winsomeness as dainty as the grin of a gargoyle. A little later Mozart, equally great in mastery of form and Handel's superior in characterization, accomplishes precisely the same thing in Figaro's formal bantering aria "Non più andrai," but more often as in Leporello's enumeration of Don Giovanni's fair conquests, he modifies the *aria* giving it freedom in form as well as in expressiveness.

While Italian opera has become in a sense cosmopolitan, holding the stage and dominating tradition in every land, Germany, France and England have each made important contribution to musical comedy. In North Germany the Singspiel appeared as a play sometimes serious, but more often comic, whose musical basis was mainly either actual folk-songs or little compositions in the folk-song manner. Long narrations not unlike British ballads rehearsed in a dozen or more verses such woes as the kidnapping of an innocent maiden knitting at the wayside. One verse lures her by a trumped-up story of distress. Another transports her to the wicked nobleman's castle. Another frankly presses his amorous attentions. A verse or two vigorously scorns him. She is locked in a lofty room. In the dead of night, at about the eleventh verse, she throws a feather bed out of the

window and, projecting herself with great accuracy upon it, escapes to the twelfth reiteration of the tune and gets back home in time to sing this song. Here was a familiar style perennially popular and not without considerable dramatic possibility, which has proved itself available even down to our present light comedies in which the so-called "lyrics" are its direct successor. George Cohan in his *Hello Broadway* with cheerful cynicism tells how the whole thing is done, and right there on the stage produces such a tepid lyric, "By the Erie Canal," whose sole merit is its avowed banality in both text and tune. Yet as he says, when you sing the thing through your nose, it goes. Now this direct cut away from tradition and right across the footlights at the people, was recognized as a valuable bit of operatic material by Mozart as in his Bird-catcher's song in the German *Magic Flute*, and in the equally effective comedy features of his Italian operas. But more significant is the appearance of this simple verse form in some of the most serious and pathetic moments of Gluck's *Orpheus*. Kurvenal's song in the symphonic *Tristan* even suggests this form, while the French school from Lulli to Gounod has similarly interspersed these *couplets* with the larger *aria* forms.

The German Singspiel differed then from the *opera buffa* in being neither an imitation of nor a studied contrast to some larger and more aristocratic form. It was a popular musical play of independent origin with familiar subject and a familiar kind of music. The Salzburger Mozart with his Italian training, German environment, and facile genius was the one master who could combine the two national traditions in such a work as the *Magic Flute*, and cross-fertilize the elegance of *il bel canto* with the grace of native comedy in a *Figaro*. It may be said further that the eclecticism of Mozart made possible *Der Freischütz* of von Weber, in which German characteristics are more prominent, and that these two, with the symphonic impulse of Beethoven, opened the way for the ultra German Richard Wagner.

The *Opéra Comique* of France means more than mere musical comedy. First, it may be an opera with some spoken dialogue and usually a happy ending, but not necessarily containing any real comedy. This in contrast to *grand opera* in which all dialogue is sung. Second, it means any production identified with a certain theater in Paris, The Opéra Comique. Bizet's *Carmen* is for this reason called *opéra comique*, though essentially a tragedy relieved by lightness of touch and by some scenes of comedy.

Musical comedy has really found its greatest development and variety with the French. Its earliest appearance is as an

outgrowth of the Trouvère music of the thirteenth century when Adam de la Hale wrote the charming little *Play of Robin and Marion*.

The highly finished development in the eighteenth century differed as much from Italian and German forms as they differed from each other. Reaching a culmination at the hands of Monsigny, Grétry and Martini in the years immediately preceding the French Revolution, it clearly reflects the spirit and elegance of that heartless and superficial time. An amusement for the pampered few, it sings not of peasants and shepherdesses but of beaux and princesses masquerading as such,—not of the real beauties of nature but of the charms of formal gardens. Grotto, fountain and palace are as artificial as the make-believe rusticity of the characters. Here was no popular well-spring of music, nor healthy boisterous comedy but a highly finished superficial art whose beauties were grace of expression, elegance of manner, without sincerity of sentiment.

“L’art surpasse ici la nature

Vous enchantez mes yeux, sans affecter mon coeur.”

But as we have seen valuable musical assets developed out of the exaggeration of the Italian *aria*, so this unreal period of French *opéra comique* was the melting-pot in which was fused and fashioned the lovely expressional technique of the modern French opera. It would seem that almost any form of human virtuosity needed to be worked to its limit up some blind alley of mistaken purpose before reaching a perfection serviceable to art’s highest needs.

La serva Padrona had been brought over from Italy and performed in Paris in 1752, where it precipitated great bitterness between rival parties, a war less of musicians than of pamphleteers and clagues whose two factions were known as the king’s party and the queen’s party. Out of this very quarrel and its renewal a few years later in the famous operatic war between the Gluckists and the Piccinnists, developed, however, a theoretical discussion of comparative merits which proved of much benefit to subsequent French writing through adoption of various features of this school of Italian comedy.

The nineteenth-century French comic opera of the school of Boieldieu and Auber had a fluency and grace which was also a considerable factor in modern melodic development. Edmund Gurney in his critical work *The Power of Sound* cites the melodies of Auber as among the most striking and sincere achievements

in all musical literature. Auber also excelled in fidelity of characterization.

The English people have occupied a peculiar position in relation to music. Their patronage of opera, symphony, and other forms has always been generous. It was that patronage which welcomed Handel and made possible the long and productive final period of his career, when his attention and powers were turned to oratorio. It was on the invitation of the English that Haydn produced his *Seasons* and Mendelssohn his *Elijah*. With such continuous interest in music it is unquestionably true that the English have, nevertheless, originated little either of musical form or substance. Their opera has been borrowed, excepting one extremely characteristic form, the comic ballad opera. As with any national musical comedy this had its rise in the uniting of simple music with the spoken drama. The first and best known work of this kind was the *Beggar's Opera* whose dialogue is spoken and whose music is but the stringing together of well known airs and popular songs of the day. The English have always had a fondness for such tunes, keeping them in the popular memory from generation to generation, with more persistence perhaps than any other people. So when this form appeared there was a great fund of such songs ranging from the Shakespearean *Green sleeves* down through the years to the then contemporary *Sally in our Alley*. It is amazing to note the number of such tunes in the *Beggar's Opera*, no less than sixty-nine. A soliloquy of MacHeath in jail contains eight of them. They follow each other in no order of sequence and with entire musical irrelevancy, and have not even the poor excuse of the Italian *pasticcio*, a loose composite form then current and made by throwing together the most favored *arias* from various operas. The medley of our college glee clubs and dance orchestras is the only thing like it which we now have. But our medley has but comparatively little material upon which it may draw, and is soon over, while the ballad opera found in the wealth of commonly known ballads the music to furnish forth a long evening's play. It met with a surprising and lasting popularity. The text of the *Beggar's Opera*, a rather coarse and pointed satire upon current events and personages, was written by John Gay, the contemporary of Swift and "a safe companion and an early friend" of Pope. Its musical patchwork was pieced and its overture written by Dr. Pepusch. It was brought out in 1728 and held the stage with frequent repetition until late in the nineteenth century. This great and continued popularity is the only fact of significance

in this connection, for it cannot be said that the ballad opera form had influence upon other writing either in England or elsewhere. The tradition was kept alive for a time by Storace, Horn and Shield, who wrote more and more of original music for their plays as the stock of old music ran low. English critics are fond of tracing the sequence of this school to the one really successful English opera, *The Bohemian Girl*. But the connection is very slight at most, as the composer Michael Balfe, an Irishman, based his work upon enthusiastic admiration and study of French *opéra comique*. Making an allowance for the remoteness of its theme from current events one can not but be surprised, in reading Gay's libretto now, that the *Beggar's Opera* was received with such favor. That a story reeking with all the most unsavory qualities of crime, deceit, and impurity could be accepted even under the disguise of fun condemns the spirit of its age rather than commends the play itself. We look through it in vain for the equivalent of Italian mimicry, of the Singspiel's unstudied, frank humor or of French wit. Sordid to a degree, it is hard to realize that it was ever considered bright or even funny. Its only saving grace is the sweet direct simplicity of some of the old tunes and Gay's one clever verse:

"How happy could I be with either
Were t'other fair charmer away."

In these later days the gulf between *The Merry Widow* and grand opera is still wide and of course must properly remain so, but no discovery or device in the one is long unappropriated by the other. Humperdinck's *Haensel und Gretel* profited largely by study of the Wagnerian method, and Wagner himself in his one noble comedy *Die Meistersinger* shows a promptness, definiteness and facility in command of dramatic material which continued in his later works and which we sometimes wish might have been present in equal degree elsewhere.

Richard Strauss manifests the true spirit of comedy in his elaborate *Rosenkavalier* but just as Mozart's tragedies and comedies were almost completely identical in material and method of procedure, so we find Strauss drawing on all the new resources of his complicated technique in about the same proportion in *Rosenkavalier* as in the tragic *Electra*.

New opera comes in upon us these days from many sources. Russia, Spain, the new Italy, and the mystic lands of Maeterlinck's fancies all have given us recent works of great significance and beauty. Each has made closer approach in some particular to

the great unattained goal of dramatic unity and power through the medium of music. Whether opera will ere long vindicate itself in full attainment, and will so throw off the reproach of inconsistency which has dogged its steps through the centuries cannot be prophesied, but comedy has brought the goal nearer. In his ascending years, the aged Verdi turned from former ideals, and with wonderful vigor wrote his *Falstaff*. Is it not significant that this work which crowned at once his long life and the long life of Italian opera was a comedy?

Comedy has then through various times and places gone hand in hand with opera, clarifying, balancing, and restraining the latter to its great betterment. Lightness of touch, easy and graceful movement, verisimilitude and naturalness as well as enlarged musical resource, have come over from musical comedy and promoted opera's progress toward that difficult achievement, dramatic sincerity.